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Mountain Nerf

A Star Wars Creature Feature

By Jeff Quick

Known but not loved on dozens of worlds, the humble nerf has a deserved reputation as a smelly, ill-tempered beast that resists herding, despite zoologists' insistence in classifying it as a herd animal. Though they fight among themselves almost as much as they fight their keepers, they do tend toward herd behavior, standing together for comfort and safety against predators.

Nerfs rarely grow over a meter and a half long, but their horns and powerful kicks still make them worthy of respect among ranchers. The species originated on Alderaan, but the exquisite taste of nerf steaks and the nerfs' adaptability soon allowed herders to transplant herds onto several Core Worlds and well into the colony systems. Production increased to meet demand for all the Core systems, but nerf meat and wool rarely make it out into the Mid Rim or beyond. Planets farther out usually have their own local favorites, and most ranchers would rather raise banthas who have gentler dispositions and are gentler on the nose.

Mountain Grown Variety

The nerfs on the rocky colony planet of Fennesa have adapted to the mountainous terrain over their several thousand years there. More nimble than their flatland cousins, these nerfs live on the rocky mountain slopes, eating the grass and thistled scrubs that grow between rocks. While the typical "plains" nerf is kept in pens and let out to pasture only when necessary, nerf herders of the mountainous persuasion leave their herds out nearly year-round. They usually keep rams and ewes on separate mountains as a safety precaution, but by using their sticks to keep a herd on its own mountain, the herders keep them corralled and protected from predators with topography.

Getting nerfs off the mountain for shearing or slaughter is (no pun intended) the downside to this scheme. Mountain nerfs are incorrigible hiders. Most Fennesa mountains are riddled with shallow caves and rocky overhangs, where the nerfs hide for weeks. This isn't a problem until herders have to drive the herd down to the barns for shearing and health inspections. Some herders have experimented with tracking devices, but most still do it the old-fashioned way: hunting the nerfs down one by one, dragging them out of their holes, and sending them on to the herd below.

Fighting within a herd is more dangerous on elevated terrain. The nerf rams seldom hurt each other while butting heads, but the Fennesa Nerf Herding Council estimates that each year about 5.6 rams out of a thousand are lost due

to falls. Although herders clear a mountain of predators before they release a herd onto it, the occasional wounded or dead ram at the bottom attracts scavengers who also enjoy a good nerf steak (very rare).

A healthy mountain nerf can defend itself from these nuisances with its horns, its surprisingly powerful kicks, and its spittle. Mountain nerf spittle is not only foul smelling but also slightly acidic, leaving a sting and a red mark on the unlucky target.

Once their primary weapons have been deployed, nerfs prefer to bolt away from unfamiliar creatures. On loose rock, this has been known to start landslides. Animal behaviorists disagree on whether this is an intentional defense ploy by the mountain nerfs. Most predators prefer to attack from above, making the ploy useless. On the other hand, the nerfs are quick and show a willingness to run past predators to reach higher ground. Whether this is clever or stupid remains debatable.

How Do You Stop a Nerf Herder From Smelling?

More than the spit, the steaks, and the surliness combined, nerfs are famous for their stench. Their smell gets on everything around them, including people. Nerf herders are serious about their profession. They don't get much respect in the larger galaxy, but they're experts at a tough job and more savvy than you'd expect about it.

Vreet Harak, a 20-year-old Human, is a third-generation herder working for the Grand Horn Ranch Corporation on Fennesa. Vreet is just about what most people would picture when they hear "nerf herder." His hair is unkempt, and he hasn't shaved in what looks like a week. His voice is nasal, as if losing his sense of smell has somehow affected his speech. He wears the bright yellow poncho favored by Fennesa nerf herders.

Vreet admits that he's never known what it's like to have a sense of smell. "People complain all the time, and it's all most people know about nerfs, but I grew up on this ranch and never spent much time anywhere else. If nerfs smell bad, I don't know what smells good!" He laughs with a snort when he says this.

The unexpected twist on Vreet is on his poncho. It's always dirty because he's been wrestling nerfs out of caves, but in contrast to other herders' ponchos, it's remarkably spit-free.

"Just don't take any guff from 'em," he says. "Let 'em know who's in charge, that you're not afraid of a little spit. They come around. They stop spitting on you. Maybe it's because once you're not a threat, you're not worth spit," he says, laughing again with his nasally snort.

Nerf herder life is more than cheap jokes and playing sabbac until the end of the season. Mountain predators -- local variations on the big cats and birds found on a thousand worlds -- keep them busy protecting the herd. All nerf herders carry long poles used to nudge nerfs into place without getting kicked. Most of them also carry sporting blaster rifles, and a few have eerie sniper precision.

When asked about predators, Vreet says, "Hopefully, you get 'em a few

hundred meters off. The good thing is, they can't smell you over the nerfs, so you can sneak up on 'em a lot of the time. The bad thing is sometimes you get attacked 'cause they're thinking you're a nerf."

"If it comes down to me or the nerfs, well... I'd just try to squeeze off a couple more shots before I made that decision."

Despite the long hours, the modest pay, and the danger, Vreet and his fellow herders don't have many complaints about a lifestyle that few people would choose at blasterpoint.

"The worst part about it is once they burn out your sniffer, you can't taste real good. We eat nerf steak all the time, but it could be shoe leather for all I know. Got a nice texture, though."